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*TWO BIOGRAPHIES OF MARTIN LUTHER*<sup>1</sup>

JOHN WINTHROP PLATNER

ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Luther is a fascinating subject for the historian. Not only does the personality of the man himself offer exceptional attractions, but so too does the age in which he lived, for then society, politics, and religion were all in the melting-pot, out of which in time was to issue the modern world. Luther was a product of the old, but he was also in a very true sense the exponent of the new. "The world is not what it once was," said he to the German nobles,—knowing that again the fulness of the times had come. The favorite assertion of many German writers that Luther was the Reformation is often disputed, yet the statement is not half so exaggerated as it sounds, for if ever the spirit of a great movement which permanently affected the welfare of mankind got itself embodied in the person of one man, that movement was the Protestant revolution, and that man was Friar Martin.

The Empire, which theoretically controlled the western world, was politically unstable. Maximilian, to be sure, cherished vast dynastic hopes, cryptically expressed in his inherited Hapsburg motto, A. E. I. O. U., an acrostic of the vowels,—*Austriæ est imperare orbi universo*,—but both he and his successor, Charles V, found their self-imposed life-task so stupendous as to be impossible. Against their ambitious plan of imperial centralization was set the power of an aristocratic confederacy, represented by the seven Prince Electors, each of whom, quite naturally although perhaps inconsistently, sought at the same time to tighten his own hold upon the particular domain which he governed.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, the Man and his Work, by Arthur Cushman McGiffert. pp. xi 397. New York, The Century Co., 1911. \$3 net.

The Life and Letters of Martin Luther, by Preserved Smith. pp. xvi 490. Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911. \$3.50 net.

Their exercise of power was checked in its turn by the varying degrees of territorial independence asserted by the German princes, while private warfare disturbed the peace, and turbulent *Bundschue* threatened the stability of social and political institutions alike. None of these conflicting elements gave promise of producing a strong and enduring German nationality. But through their confusion sounded the clear note of Luther's *Address to the German Nobles*, and that called the nation into life.

European society in the early sixteenth century presented the familiar spectacle of privileged classes, full-grown and in control, with the spirit of democracy as yet only struggling to be born. Occasional agrarian uprisings foretold the coming of *Demos*, but an adequate platform upon which *Demos* might stand was yet to be constructed. Popular demands, crude in themselves and cruder still in the method of their attempted enforcement, were not enough. Neither was uncontrolled radicalism adequate, nor any programme of social revolution devoid of moral restraints. The age called for constructive effort. The primary need was of some one who could search out and formulate the democratic principle; whether he applied it consistently and thoroughly was of less moment. Luther's masterly treatise, *On the Liberty of a Christian Man*, however paradoxical it might seem to a superficial reader, met the fundamental requirements of the situation. Indeed, it met them so completely that, in spite of all the intervening years, the world has not yet fully succeeded in carrying out the noble programme there laid down. Its merit consisted chiefly in this, that it offered to the forces of emancipation, set in action by the spirit of the Renaissance, a religious motive and a moral direction. To bring the world's life under the influence of this dominant motive was more than could be accomplished by any one man, however great.

The monk of Wittenberg unquestionably did influence the course of politics and of social life in modern Europe, but yet, when all has been said, it still remains true that his principal contribution to the world was not in either of these fields, important as they may be, but rather in the field of religion, which is the most important of all. To understand his profound influence here, it is necessary to call the historical imagination to our aid, since

otherwise it is extremely difficult for the modern secular mind to comprehend how completely the church dominated mediaeval Europe. It touched life at every point, literally from the cradle to the grave. The mysteries of the great Beyond were illumined by the light of its faith, and the severities of future punishment alleviated through application of the inexhaustible resources of the *thesaurus meritorum*. Kings and emperors had vied with each other in granting to churches and monasteries every kind of immunity and privilege, and under the feudal system bishoprics and abbeys had taken on the character of vast temporal domains, comparable in extent and power with those of secular princes, and often superior to them in actual influence. For the ecclesiastical prince bore a double character; he held the customary feudal sovereignty over lands, revenues, and men, and he also held the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Over all was extended the supreme authority of the Pope, who had ample beatitudes for his obedient children, but for the disobedient the ban, the anathema, and final excommunication. The papal system appeared to be thoroughly intrenched and hedged about with walls and bulwarks. Its arsenals were fully supplied with defensive and offensive weapons. The fold of the Good Shepherd had become an embattled fortress and a prison-house for many souls.

The Ninety-five Theses struck the first blow for freedom. Then came the treatise, *On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church*, which made a breach in the walls of Rome, and was like the opening of the prison to them that were bound. One hardly knows which to admire most, the audacity of Luther's attack or its effectiveness. That one of the foremost of the crowned heads of Europe undertook to reply to Luther's tract is the best evidence of its success.

The positive part of the Protestant programme was boldly adventurous and undeniably attended with hazard. In comparison with its severe demands upon the heart and will the mediaeval church offered spiritual ease and the narcotic of mental peace. Men were invited to commit themselves unreservedly to the church, whereby consciously and deliberately they transferred to the sacrosanct institution all responsibility for their

souls' future welfare, which was in a manner guaranteed to them. Protestantism on the other hand demanded from every one of its adherents that he somehow gain for himself the assurance of salvation. His responsibility was immediate, untransferable, and very pressing. The new individualism, with its glorious sense of personal liberty, had its perils and its tasks. It is easy to be a slave, but it is hard to be free. Upon the serious observer, whose spirit is at all sensitive to the moral issues of life, the sixteenth century cannot fail to make a profound impression, for in it one may behold humanity taking a momentous step forward, into the dark. Luther led the van,—light-hearted, courageous, confident,—a smile of gladness on his lips.

But there was a deep seriousness underneath it all. Once in the darkest days of the Civil War a man complained to Lincoln of his apparent levity, and received the touching answer, "If I couldn't tell these stories, I should die." A laugh sometimes keeps a heart from breaking. Something like this was doubtless true of Martin Luther. His profound seriousness cannot for a moment be doubted. When certain well-meaning friends urged him to adopt a policy of comprehension through compromise, such as Melancthon frequently advocated, Luther sternly said, "I see they think this is a comedy of men, instead of a tragedy of God and Satan, as it is." Such have the world's leaders ever found their task,—a battle,—tragic wrestling with powers which are not merely flesh and blood.

We may safely go a long distance with the enthusiastic German followers of the great Reformer, when they say that Luther was the Reformation. Nevertheless we must not hastily suppose that all the forces which were making the old world new were concentrated in his person. For one thing, the transformation of learning in western Europe had begun before him, and would have gone on without him. His primary interests were practical and moral, not intellectual or aesthetic. So far as the fresh intellectual life of the age is concerned, he felt comparatively little interest in it, apart from its bearing on the subject of religion. He spoke his word indeed, wherever there was opportunity. With particular zest did he denounce the long regnant philosopher Aristotle,—that "damnable, proud, cunning heathen,"

who "led astray and deluded many of the best Christians with his false words." But the philosopher's fate was sealed long before Luther penned his indignant and picturesque malediction. Friar Martin was not the apostle of the Renaissance, even for Germany. In the domain of pure learning Reuchlin, Melanchthon, and especially Erasmus contributed far more to the world's advancement than Luther ever could have done. "I was born," he once declared, "to fight with mobs and devils, and so my books are very stormy and warlike. . . . I am the rough woodsman who must blaze the trail and clear the path. But Master Philip comes along gently and quietly, builds and plants, sows and waters with joy, according to the gifts God has so richly bestowed upon him."

Nor was Luther primarily and of choice a leader in the cause of German nationality. He did no doubt make very substantial contributions to the growth of German national feeling, nor would it be right to say that these contributions were indirect. Without him it is certain that that feeling would have been much slower in development. Simply to have pointed out the need of it was much. "We are a gigantic mass but lack direction," was his own diagnosis of the case. Echoing Luther, the humanist Melanchthon called Germany "a blinded Polyphemus." If the first step forward is to know with certainty just where one stands, then Luther may fairly be said to have led his countrymen in their national advance. But one may recognize this aspect of his work without drawing the mistaken inference that he first propounded the important political principle of the autonomy of the state. Elsewhere in Europe forces of an entirely different kind had been working towards the same end,—in France, for instance, through the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges, and in England through the Acts of Provisors and Praemunire. Probably the Germans themselves would not have advanced so fast and so far towards a genuine national life, in spite of the Reformer's influence, had not the Turkish forces on the east and the armies of Francis I on the west diverted the Emperor's attention from his Saxon subjects, leaving them measurably free to develop from within. It is plain enough to every student that there were princes, statesmen, scholars, and reformers, scattered over western Europe, all consciously

or unconsciously co-operating to bring about national consolidation, quite apart from the monk of Wittenberg.

All this, however, detracts in no degree from Luther's fame. He will always occupy a unique position in the history of his time, and every comparison between him and other leaders serves, in the end, only to establish his superiority. In effective moral leadership none of his contemporaries, not even Zwingli, can for a moment be compared with him. He led men back from their self-made pomps and vanities to the Gospel as the foundation of their faith,—back to the forgiving love of God in Christ. Extraordinarily full of interest is this German peasant! Of humble birth, and yet the friend of princes; a monk, and yet a man; a revolutionist, and yet a conservator of the past. Through his lecture-room in the university he multiplied himself a hundred-fold. From his pulpit in the castle church he preached the Gospel to Wittenberg. Through his translation of the Bible and his hymns he preached it to all Germany. And through the printing-press he taught the world. Martyrdom for the cause he long expected, and indeed desired, but he was spared for the more arduous witness-bearing of a long and laborious life. Unmatched in the art of polemics, dauntless in combat, a master of invective, a magnificent fighter, he could yet be as playful as a child, as gentle and tender as a woman. Imperfect no doubt he was,—hasty, hot-tempered, at times mistaken,—but a most rare spirit, a nobleman, a Christian.

To those who sympathize with the principles of the Protestant Reformation, the most attractive and at the same time the most impressive period of Luther's career falls within the first five years. Then, in the prime of his powers, exultant in his newly found spiritual freedom, increasingly confident of success, notwithstanding what princes, priests, or popes might do against him, he sprang into the lists and fought the good fight of faith. Carlyle called the Theses "the first stroke of honest demolition to an ancient thing grown false and idolatrous." In explanation of his boldness, Luther afterwards declared that he had received from heaven the gift of depending upon himself instead of others. From being an object of contempt and derision to the powerful hierarchy, he soon became the object of their dread and hatred.

The time came when a single burning message from his pen struck something very like terror to the heart of the proud bishop and elector, Albert of Mayence, and again to that of Duke George of Saxony. The duke's son complained of Luther's prayers against his father, so potent were they believed to be at the heavenly throne. There is a fine scorn in the scene enacted outside the Elster gate of Wittenberg, where, in the presence of pupils and colleagues, Luther committed to the flames the papal bull of excommunication together with the canon law. In dramatic intensity, however, this scene must yield to the more famous one at the Diet of Worms, where Luther stood calmly defiant in the presence of the assembled powers of the Empire, and made his great refusal.

In open rebellion against the Pope, Luther clung tenaciously to his belief in the duty of passive obedience to the civil power in civil affairs. He insisted that his followers should not attempt to establish their cause by force of arms, even though many of them were clamoring for armed resistance. When at last the Schmalkaldic League was formed, its advocates won Luther's reluctant assent to their plans only by bringing forward an ancient law which seemed to allow subjects in certain contingencies to resist the emperor. Luther's own account of the matter betrays a feeling of disgust, thinly masked by a scholastic justification of their contention. He writes to Spengler:

The affair then reduces itself to this syllogism: whatever Caesar, or the law of Caesar, decrees, must be obeyed; but the law decrees that he must be resisted in such a case; therefore he must be resisted. Now we have always taught the major premise, that the authorities must be obeyed in civil affairs; but we do not assert the minor premise, nor do we know anything about it. Wherefore we drew no conclusion, but referred the whole matter to the jurists,

of whom, it should be added, Luther cherished no high opinion.

About the year 1525 the student of the Reformation movement finds that the course of events becomes more troubled. With the enlargement of the Protestant constituency and the inevitable complication of issues Luther's problems multiplied, and the strain upon him became correspondingly more wearing. He found himself occupying the position of a little pope for his Germans, and



to him all manner of causes, great and small, were constantly referred. Very naturally men looked to him for guidance in all departments of the new church life which he had called into being. However willingly he might respond,—and he was never sparing of himself,—this constant drain upon his almost inexhaustible energies and sympathies was bound in the end to make itself felt. His marriage, while it brought into the Black Cloister the comfort and joy of home life and the companionship of a devoted helper, raised a hue and cry against him. The painful scenes of the Peasants' revolt caused a bitterness which was wide-spread and lasting.

Moreover Luther encountered increasing difficulty in maintaining purity of faith and life among his followers, whereas, by his principles and according to his expectation, this should have been ever easier. Theological divisions emerged to vex his soul. With Zwingli he could reach no agreement, and the forces of Protestantism seemed to be hopelessly divided. Luther's own health became impaired, and his indomitable spirit threatened at times to weaken. Not a serene old age, which his devoted followers would have wished for him, but anxious years, full of unremitting toil and marked at times by censoriousness and impatience, due in large part to the prolonged physical suffering which he was compelled to undergo,—this is the less inspiring picture which meets our eyes during his later years. "Instead of finding the world transformed into a paradise by his Gospel, he saw things continuing much as before, and his heart grew sick with disappointment," writes one of his most recent biographers. Yet it is Luther's glory that he never actually despaired. He died true to his faith, loyal to the cause to which he had given his life. "Do you stand firm by Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" asked Justus Jonas shortly before the end. "Yes," was Luther's simple answer. It was his last word on earth.

Two valuable studies of Luther's life have lately appeared on this side of the water, one by Dr. Arthur C. McGiffert, the well known professor of church history at Union Theological Seminary, the other by a younger scholar, Dr. Preserved Smith, fellow and lecturer in history at Amherst College. Apparently the approach of the four-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation,

which will be celebrated in 1917, had no especial influence on the production of either of these volumes, although they serve as timely reminders of it. Dr. Smith was moved to rewrite the life of Luther by the rapid advance in Reformation studies during the past ten or fifteen years, in which he himself has had a part through his publication of articles in the *English Historical Review* and elsewhere. Dr. McGiffert, who has long been an enthusiastic student of Luther, was moved to write by the request of the *Century Magazine*, whose editor conceived the happy idea of publishing a popular biography of the Reformer in serial form. As a book, this biography retains the special features which distinguished it in the magazine. It has many well-chosen illustrations; the text is free from notes of any kind; and, while an index is provided, there are no other technical paraphernalia, such as scholars are accustomed to expect in every modern work of history. The author has even dispensed with the conventional preface and introduction. The casual reader might not suspect that this life-story was written at first hand from the sources, and that, in the author's original manuscript, it was completely documented, but to the competent critic the quality of the work is sufficiently apparent. Yet it must be confessed that Dr. McGiffert is not at his best in "popular" writing. Excellent as this book is, and it deserves high praise, one feels that it would have been still better if the author had been addressing his usual public, and had not felt himself under the constraint of adapting his style to a more general audience.

Dr. Smith's volume tells the story of Luther's life at greater length than Dr. McGiffert's, and with more detail. It is furnished with notes, but by no means burdened with them, and it contains an extensive, although not exhaustive bibliography. In an appendix the author prints a few little-known letters, not found in the latest German edition of Luther's correspondence by Enders and Kawerau. The book bears evidence of diligent preparation for the author's task. It is written simply, in a direct, straightforward fashion, which is without rhetorical art but never dull, and the product is sure to be useful not only to students but also to general readers. A number of good illustrations add interest to the narrative. The plan of presentation is such as to necessi-

tate some repetition, and there are a few unnecessary digressions, —for instance, on the subject of indulgences and on the history of the sacramental system, but no doubt there may be readers who will be grateful for both. In literary style Dr. Smith's work suffers a little by comparison with Dr. McGiffert's, but hardly more than might be expected in view of the difference in method. In several respects the books admirably supplement each other. If one should say that he rises from their perusal with the conviction that Martin Luther was something more and greater than either of these two biographers has succeeded in depicting, that after all would be in a sense a compliment to both authors, for what better result of his labor could the biographer of a great man desire?

The reader who wishes to obtain a general view of Luther's life and personality will choose McGiffert; he who seeks to know his life in detail will read Smith. The reader who would carry away a unified impression of Luther's historical significance will turn to McGiffert; he who wishes to acquaint himself with each of the principal events of his career will find more to his purpose in Smith. McGiffert pays considerable attention to Luther's thought; Smith very little, believing, as he himself says, that a man's theology does not constitute an essential part of the biographer's task,—a judgment in which most persons will hardly agree with him. McGiffert pays his readers the compliment of taking much for granted; Smith pursues the safer, but less flattering, plan of explaining many things as he goes along. Where an historical judgment is required, it is reassuring to find the two authors generally in agreement. For example, both of them justify Luther's attitude towards the Peasants, although at the same time they condemn his intemperate and cruel tract.

The lack of any adequate treatment of Luther's thought by Dr. Smith is regrettable, especially in view of his frankly expressed opinion that Luther's "dogmatic system has lost part of its hold upon mankind, and seems likely to lose still more." The phrase, "dogmatic system," is not happily chosen. Luther was the founder of a theological method, not the framer of a system, and while it is no doubt true that he was led to take positions some of which are no longer tenable, yet the underlying principles on

which his method was based, and the method itself, are very much alive in modern Protestantism. His method and type of thinking are very clearly indicated by Dr. McGiffert, although naturally treated in a less systematic manner than in that author's recent essay on *Protestant Thought before Kant*. Not only the progress of his thought, but also the logical implications of it are pointed out, even where Luther himself failed to move on to them. One may see how far he went, and also how far short he stopped of the attainable position. One may see the reformer and the conserver united in the same person, and the apparent cross-currents of his thinking finally combined in what the Hegelians would call the "higher unity," which, however, Dr. McGiffert would never think of calling by that name. A single paragraph may suffice for purposes of illustration.

In his attack on indulgences he had appealed from the indulgence-vendors to the pope; at Augsburg, from the pope-ill-informed to the pope-to-be-better-informed; and soon afterward from the pope to a council. Now, when the decision of a council was cited against him, he declined to be bound by it, and took his stand upon the sole authority of the Scriptures. But even this was not final. The Bible itself, he maintained, has to be used with discrimination, for parts of it do not teach Christian truth. He really substituted for all external authorities the enlightened conscience of the individual Christian. The Bible he read for himself and admitted the right of no council or body of men to read it for him. This, in principle, though he never fully realized it, and seldom acted upon it, meant the right of private judgment in religious things, and in it lay the promise of a new age. [Page 144.]

It would be difficult to state the fundamental position of Martin Luther more accurately or more compactly than Dr. McGiffert has stated it in these few short sentences. With equal clearness does the Union professor point out that Luther was at times far more powerfully influenced by conditions than he was by theories. What principles of reasoning could ever have impelled him or his followers to pass from their belief "that salvation is possible apart from the pope" to the "still more radical belief that it was impossible with the pope"? Verily there is an "iron logic of events" more cogent than the logic of the schools.

Neither of our two biographers is blind to Luther's faults. His intolerance, his coarseness, his wholesale employment of abusive language, his occasional seeming irreverence, are all noted by them both. The one conspicuous blunder of his career, namely his hesitating sanction of Philip of Hesse's bigamous marriage with Margaret von der Saal, is frankly condemned, although both authors do Luther the justice of recognizing that he acted conscientiously in this extremely awkward and difficult affair. Dr. Smith calls attention to the fact that the very qualities which have aroused the severest criticism of a later age were elements of strength to Luther in his own. The common people, naturally timid before rulers, took heart when they heard him address a king as "Henry, by God's disgust king of England," and then go on to call him a "damnable and rotten worm." It was not nice language, but honors were evenly divided between the two disputants, for Henry had called Luther "a wolf of hell." It was not the same thing however for a monk to launch invective against royalty as for a king to denounce a monk. Again, to hear the pope called "most hellish father" was a novelty,—rather a blasphemous one, many thought, but effective as a means of encouraging religious independence. Luther's bold speech seemed to strip the mighty of their tinsel, and to invite a judgment based not on crowns and mitres but on character, manhood's universal test.

Luther's intolerance of certain other Protestant leaders, especially Zwingli and Schwenkfeld, while historically intelligible, is harder for the modern mind to condone. One rises from each fresh perusal of the proceedings at the Marburg conference with the deepened conviction that if ever two men ought to have put aside their differences and worked shoulder to shoulder in the same cause, Luther and Zwingli were the men. Luther himself was convinced that if the forces of Protestantism were only united, "all the gates of hell and all the papacy and all the Turks and all the world" could not harm them. Yet to the Swiss reformer he seemed unalterably opposed. Only one short month before his death he wrote this paraphrase of the first Psalm: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the sacramentarians, nor standeth in the way of the Zwinglians, nor sitteth in the seat

of the men of Zürich." Towards Schwenkfeld he was, if possible, even more bitter: "The Lord rebuke thee, Satan, and may the spirit which called you, and the race you run, and all your fellow sacramentarians and Eutychians, go with you and your blasphemies to perdition." Religious toleration was evidently not within the circle of Luther's interests. Yet it was in principle involved in his position, and its coming throughout all Protestant lands was only a question of time. In fact it was largely due to him that it came at all.

The two biographies which have here concerned us are welcome additions to our Luther literature. It is much to be desired that they should be widely read. Fresh interest in the German leader and a more adequate popular conception of his extraordinary service to the world will be certain to follow their perusal. If they fail to arouse enthusiasm, they will at any rate serve the cause of sound knowledge. Our torches can still be kindled at the altars whereon Carlyle and Freytag lighted their sacrificial fires. For the worthy interpretation of a great life is something other than the narrative of its outward happenings, however faithfully recorded,—something other than the transcription of its words and thoughts. In order to catch the full significance of a man like Martin Luther, one must needs feel a spiritual kinship with him, such as was felt by the Scottish hero-worshipper. And to portray him to the world, one must possess something of the patriotic sympathy, the artistic insight, and the dramatic power of the author of *Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit*. It is no easy task to cross an interval of four hundred years, and make the dim and shadowy figures of a far-off age take on the aspect of reality. Few are the prophetic writers upon whom such gifts of re-creative vision are bestowed. Most of us, authors and readers alike, must be content with writing or reading simple annals of the past, wherein we are constantly aware that the figures which pass across the stage are the figures of the dead, and all our chronicling is but an inscription on their tomb. They lived once; they live no more. But one day there comes the literary artist,—and then they live again before our eyes.